

CRANBERRIES

Duxbury Tercentenary Committee
Duxbury, Massachusetts
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The Romance of the Lowly Cranberry

A recent talk in the Duxbury Tercentenary series was devoted to Duxbury's most famous industry, ship-building. This business, as was indicated in the talk, dwindled during the middle of the last century and eventually disappeared. Duxbury has another industry which has never dwindled - that of cranberry picking. The Duxbury Tercentenary Committee today presents the history of the growth of the cranberry industry in the State of Massachusetts, through the courtesy of Mr. Elroy S. Thompson, of Brockton, who provided the following interesting material dealing with the industry:

When, in 1855, the Bureau of Industries of Massachusetts for the first time included in its report a census of the cranberry production, Duxbury was a part of the picture of that great potential industry. It was a small part, but Duxbury was credited with having four acres of bog land devoted to cranberry culture, the value being given as two hundred and forty four dollars. Stephen N. Gifford was a pioneer in cranberry growing in Duxbury, as he was a pioneer and leader in many other activities in the town.

The cultivation of cranberries began in East Dennis, Cape Cod, in 1816, when Captain Henry Hall observed the apparent effect of ^{wind and sand on} a portion of his wild cranberry meadow. Captain Hall noticed that both the quantity and the quality of the crop increased amazingly where the winds had blown sand from a neighboring knoll. He took vines from the meadow near his house, ^{and} reset them adjacent to his garden after sanding the space generously. The captain's acceptance of nature's hint has resulted in an industry which produces a fruit, now the leading export crop of Massachusetts, which brings a gross annual return of approximately four and a half million dollars. The value of the crop in 1934, according to Bulletin number three hundred and thirty two of the Massachusetts Experimental Station, issued in June 1936 was about twelve percent greater than that of the commercial apple crop of all New England. As a source of agricultural income in Massachusetts, cranberry growing in recent years has been exceeded only by dairying, poultry raising and vegetable growing. As a matter of fact,

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In several towns in Plymouth County, cranberry acreage has increased enormously in locations once covered with cedar swamps and boglands of little or no value.

It was not until about 1850 that, through experimentation, cranberries were grown commercially, and eventually yielded large profits on the investments. Up to 1850, cranberries, growing wild in the meadows, were regarded as more or less common property, so far as custom was concerned, much as many persons regard the wild blueberry crop at present. It was in those days that a lovable lady living in Duxbury and known as "Sarah Mac," is said to have expressed the common feeling in replying to one of the pioneers in local cranberry culture.

As tradition has it, Sarah Mac, whose real name was Miss Sarah MacFarlin was helping herself to the fruit when the owner rebuked her for trespassing on his improved cranberry land, and quoted the law to prove his point. And here, believe it or not, is what she is reputed to have replied:

"I'm an old woman, seventy-one;
Cranberry law has just begun.
Men make laws, but I won't mind 'em;
I'll pick cranberries wherever I find 'em.

It is believed by many that there is a future in cranberry growing in Duxbury, and that the ground has not been scratched in comparison to its possibilities. Plymouth County is the largest cranberry yielding county in the world, and conditions in Duxbury are as favorable as in other towns in which the yield is many times greater.

George E. Short, of Island Creek, is one of the Duxbury men who is regarded by other cranberry growers as an expert in his line. Until his increasing cranberry interests in Duxbury demanded his entire attention, about 1935, Mr. Short was cranberry expert on the staff of the Plymouth County Extension Service.

Duxbury has never been, in all its three hundred years, what would be regarded as an industrial town, as that term is commonly known. The one industry in which it attained international fame was shipbuilding. But that industry was carried on almost exclusively by residents of the town or adjoining towns, nearly all of whom were direct descendants of early immigrants from the British isles. Those races which usually are attracted to factory towns, because of the employment offered, never made their homes in Duxbury to any extent

It was when the development of land into cranberry bogs occurred that Duxbury first witnessed an influx of so-called foreigners, whose complexions were dark and whose ways were not the ways of the people of Duxbury. Processes of the melting pot are still in their infancy in Duxbury's experience.

These cranberry pickers are known as Capeverdeans, and are, as their name suggests, descendants of the inhabitants of the Cape Verde Islands, and are of Portuguese stock.

Mr. Thompson pays tribute to them as follows:

The first generation has distinguished itself since Capeverdeans began coming to the United States about 1840. This was about the same time that growing cranberries commercially as a profit began in the Cape Cod area. The Capeverdeans, as laborers, have grown up with the industry. A large proportion of that race, especially in this section of the country, is identified with cranberry culture.

The earliest record of a Capeverdean in the United States is dated 1840, and is included in the list of officers and crew of the whaling ship, "Acushnet." It concerns John Adams, (quote) place of birth, Cape Diverd, place of residence, Fairhaven, subject of Portergal, age, twenty one, height, five feet six inches, hair and complexion dark." (end Quote) The original of this list of passengers and crew is in the Bourne Whaling Museum, New Bedford.

It was the whaling vessels that bought the first Capeverdeans to America, and New Bedford and Nantucket were the great whaling ports. ^{No matter where} ~~Wherever~~ the Capeverdians settled, they seemed to regard New Bedford as their real home in America, the port which to them seemed the gateway to the Land of Promise.

There is real romance connected with the story of Capeverdians and their appearance in America, first as the crews of whaling ships and now the backbone of the cranberry industry. On Cape Cod, where so many of them reside, they have acquired plots of land, and have become successful growers of strawberries, raspberries, and other agricultural products. They are an industrious people, and achieve wonderful results tilling land which the white owners preceding them, had failed to make productive.

Next week we will hear another Story of Duxbury prepared under the auspices of the Duxbury Tercentenary Committee, which is in charge of the celebration of Duxbury's three hundredth birthday which takes place the third, fourth and fifth of next month.